

<http://dailybruin.com/2015/06/07/student-overcomes-obstacles-to-craft-thesis-on-queer-chicanao-culture/>

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES
DAILY BRUIN

Student overcomes obstacles to craft thesis on queer Chicana/o culture

By [Jorge Valero](#)

June 7, 2015



Juan Fernández, a fourth-year Chicana/o studies transfer student, said he wants to share the lessons he's learned from battling addiction to help others overcome similar problems. (Matt Cummings/Daily Bruin)

After dropping out of high school, Juan Fernández overcame a history of addiction and homophobic bullying to help lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth through volunteer and research efforts at UCLA.

Fernández, a fourth-year Chicana/o studies transfer student, will graduate with a minor in LGBT studies in the top 5 percent of his class.

As part of his senior thesis on performance art in queer culture, Fernández curated an event in May for the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. It included a lecture and panel discussion with a local queer Chicano/Latino artist and DJ group, Maricón Collective. Fernández said he extensively researched the group, which hosts dance parties and other events across Los Angeles, and admired its goal of bringing together queer people of color.

In his presentation, Fernández spoke about how queer Chicanas/os outside of the cultural mainstream have adapted dominant heterosexual male culture to create art that uniquely reflects queer culture.

In high school, Fernández experienced homophobic bullying. He added being surrounded by a masculine culture was very traumatic for him, especially as someone who identified as genderqueer.

Fernández said these pressures made him a rebellious student, making him a target for teacher reprimand. Eventually, he dropped out of school altogether. His sporadic use of crystal meth and alcohol became an addiction that lasted several years, he said.

“By the time I was 22 years old I was trying to get clean, but I wasn’t able to (stay) sober at first,” he said.

Fernández eventually spent time at the Van Ness Recovery House, an addiction treatment center in Hollywood that accommodates LGBT people. At 28, he had achieved long-term sobriety after years of struggling. He still remembers the first day of his sobriety: June 22, 2006.

Fernández said he met his current partner soon after getting sober. He added that his partner was instrumental in motivating him to continue pursuing education.

He said he wanted his thesis to serve as a commentary on the way queer Chicana/o artists, such as Joey Terrill, have contributed to queer Chicana/o culture. Fernández added he wants his thesis to fill what he calls gaps in Chicana/o history, most importantly the cultural contributions of queer Chicanas/os.

“There’s this other (queer) history out there that also affects Chicanos,” he said. “We don’t usually exist in history books, but we do exist.”

His advisor Alicia Gaspar de Alba, a professor, founding faculty member and former chair of the UCLA César E. Chávez Department of Chicana/o Studies, said she was skeptical at first that Fernández would be able to finish his thesis because it took him so long to commit to a topic.

“He was totally focused and driven to (conduct his research),” de Alba said.

Since overcoming his addiction, Fernández has also helped those who are struggling by volunteering at an LGBT center. There, he tutors homeless LGBT youth in math, science and writing.

In the fall, he and two classmates started an LGBT studies undergraduate research symposium for UCLA students called [Q Scholars](#). Fernández said he wanted to provide a space for them to conduct academic research that deals with issues from a queer perspective, and give them access to peer mentoring and academic advising.

Taundewei Hodge, a friend who has known Fernández for more than 20 years, said he inspired her to be confident, go back to college and apply to transfer to UCLA herself.

“He’s one of my heroes,” Hodge said. “He put gas in my tank and (gave) me a road map of where to go in my life.”

Fernández said his experiences with addiction gave him the drive to stay sober and taught him to follow through on all of his goals. He added he wants to continue his volunteer work in the future and share the lessons he has learned with others caught in addiction. Fernández said he thinks it's important to stay open to learning from others' experiences.

"I don't believe in victimizing myself," Fernández said. "I (chose) to turn adversity into an opportunity to grow, aware that I will never know everything. But anything I do know, I have a responsibility to pass along."